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ABSTRACT

To help improve school public relations programs, this handbook tells how to use survey and feedback techniques and how to interpret survey results. The first chapter gives a brief overview of the usefulness of surveys for getting community feedback. Chapter 2 recommends beginning by deciding what one wants to know from a survey, what human and financial resources will be needed, and what the survey's timeline should be. Chapter 3 discusses deciding whom to interview and describes drawing a sample based on statistical confidence levels and using various sample-selection techniques. The advantages and disadvantages of personal interviews, mail surveys, and telephone surveys are enumerated in chapter 4, while chapter 5 discusses whether to use survey questions with multiple-choice, closed-response, dichotomous, preference, ranking, or rating-scale answers. Chapter 6 recommends using volunteers to conduct surveys. Analyzing, interpreting, and reporting survey results are addressed in chapter 7. Thirteen other ways besides surveys to get feedback are suggested in chapter 8, including speakers' bureaus, suggestion boxes, and student rap sessions. The final chapter briefly summarizes the handbook. Three appendices provide a table of appropriate sample sizes and a sample questionnaire and tell how to draw a survey sample. (RW)

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BASIC SCHOOL PR KIT

BASIC SCHOOL PR GUIDE

# Survey/ Feedback

HA 015 246

One in a series of eight school public relations guides which contain concise, tested and practical ideas.



National School Public Relations Association

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# Introduction

NSPRA's **Basic School PR Kit**, of which this guide is a part, is designed to provide specific, practical help for educators in starting or improving school PR programs. The Kit has been developed in response to the hundreds of requests for help NSPRA receives each year. Material on vital public relations topics is presented in the most concise, usable format possible.

The basic concept of public relations is explained on cassette tape by Edward L. Bernays, the man who pioneered the field of public relations in the 1920s. Important school PR topics are covered in detail in eight tightly-written guides. Additional materials are included in a resource packet containing public relations standards, proven ideas that work, and a PR planning guide and worksheet.

Altogether, the **Basic School PR Kit** is a short course in school PR fundamentals, a refresher for existing programs, a ready reference for dealing with problems that arise and a resource for anyone working to build public confidence in education.

This guide, *Survey/Feedback*, tells you how to conduct a survey (telephone, personal interview, or mail); the pluses and minuses of each, along with suggestions for interpreting the results. Declining enrollments have shuttered the schools and created childless neighborhoods. Higher operating costs fueled by inflation and increasing expenses have led to higher taxes. Today not even the most successful school district "knows" that the schools will be fully supported by the community. To understand how the community looks at its schools, educators must use regular survey and feedback techniques.

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# Table of Contents


**Chapter 1** Overview ..... 3

**Chapter 2** Getting Ready ..... 6

**Chapter 3** Getting Set To Start ..... 11

**Chapter 4** Deciding What Kind Of Survey To Use ..... 16

**Chapter 5** Asking The Right Questions ..... 19

**Chapter 6** Using Volunteers To Conduct The Survey ..... 22

**Chapter 7** Analyzing Results ..... 24

**Chapter 8** Wrap Up ..... 26

**Chapter 9** Summary ..... 28

**Appendices** ..... 30

# Chapter 1
# Overview

Keeping in touch with the public has always been a high priority for school officials. In the 1800s it was easy. The townspeople provided room and board for the teacher as a kind of salary supplement. School news was exchanged around the family dinner table.

Through the early 20th century, and right through the baby boom years of the 1950s, it seemed that nearly every family had children in school. Most of the time, the neighborhood school was a five-minute walk from home. In rural districts, where students generally rode the school bus to class each day, the school house was the central part of the community's social life, serving as a combination town hall, recreation center and general "go-to-meeting" place that was vital, alive and exciting.

It isn't so easy today. Our society has changed, and schools must reflect that change in their approach to education. Some think change is good, some think it's bad. Do you know what your community is thinking?

In many communities, declining enrollment has shuttered the schools and created childless neighborhoods where kids are an occasional oddity. Higher operating costs for schools, fueled by inflation and the increasing expense of the tools teachers need to prepare students for the world of tomorrow, have inevitably led to higher taxes. With fewer students in schools, taxpayers are finding it difficult to understand and harder to support. Without support administrators and school boards are finding it equally difficult to even maintain the level of educational excellence needed to prepare students for the competition of the 21st century.

We have perhaps lost the ideal that we've cherished so long—that a quality education is the key to future success—and modified it with measurements of cost, with a questioning look at how our schools' performance pays off in the community. Do good schools really help keep property values high? Can I sell my house at a profit in my school area or district?

Questions like these are asked in every community. It is the answers which vary. Yesterday, a school district could reasonably

expect parents and other citizens to support their schools. Today, not even the most successful school district can rest easy and know positively that a needed tax referendum will be approved at the polls.

While the headlines seemingly shout nothing but bad news about education in America today, those closest to our schools often see a different story in action. Many surveys have shown that **parents** feel education in general is in serious trouble today, but "the school my child goes to is very good, and the teacher is great." What does your community really think?

To effectively understand how the community looks at its schools, educators must do more than talk to each other. We must avoid becoming "Grocery Gallups," basing opinions about important school matters on information gathered during a discussion at the grocery store.

**Getting in touch** can help. By carefully following the survey techniques outlined in this booklet you will be able to:

- identify people who have things to say about a variety of issues;
- select a **representative sample** of these people that will allow you to gain a useful impression of attitudes on various topics;
- construct a survey that will deliver practical information for short- and long-range planning; and,
- organize a continuous program of survey feedback that can be implemented inexpensively and effectively at both the district and individual school-building level.

Using survey feedback techniques, educators around the country have been able to organize successful millage and bond campaigns that answered questions and gathered votes; create communication programs that help build bridges of cooperation between school and home; and, involve parents in meaningful ways so they support classroom efforts.

For example, one regional school district discovered on a survey that citizens did not understand the term "special education." Some thought it referred to programs for gifted children; others grouped vocational programs under the term. Others knew it referred to children with problems, but they were unable to differentiate between types and severity.

To successfully pass a referendum to support such programs, the district changed all its literature to refer to "handicapped youngsters," a term that a majority of citizens readily identified. With the issues clarified, the district won.

Another district faced with closing schools because of declin-

ing enrollment sought the community's opinion early through the use of surveys. They discovered that, contrary to expectations, citizens did not object to the closing of schools, provided the buildings could be put to constructive use as recreation centers, senior citizen activity centers or adult education units. By considering alternative uses for the buildings as part of the school closing process, the district avoided the bitter and rancorous debates that have plagued other districts faced with the same problem in nearby communities.

The best time to make friends is before you need them. The best time to find out what is on the minds of your community is before a crisis hits—in time to take actions that may head off the problem or prepare an adequate response.

A careful, regular survey program can identify trends in community attitudes that are vital to the operations of your school district. With attitudes about schools such a volatile issue, subject to change overnight, it's important to be in touch with what's really going on.

The best reasons for surveys are:

- to identify community concerns;
- to guide you in directions you take the school district in everything from curriculum to building programs;
- to help you avoid a crisis by improving communication with your many different publics; and
- to involve the members of your community in setting a course of development for their most important natural resource: **the children.**

It has been said that three of the most valued words in the English language are **"what's your opinion?"** Experience shows citizens like to be asked.

# Chapter 2
# Getting Ready

The first and most obvious thing you must do when getting ready to establish a formal feedback system is to answer one question: **what is it you want to know?** While it is an obvious question, the answers are not always so easy to find. Here's some starter help.

Take these ten ideas for survey projects, add two of your own, and you've got a year's worth of ideas to begin with!

1. Conduct a survey which tells you how well your communication channels are working in the community. Do people really feel informed about the schools?
2. What are community attitudes about sports in the schools? Should more money be spent to maintain current programs, or should the emphasis switch to intramural-type programs which emphasize fitness sports?
3. Is the community aware of the declining enrollment problem? What do they see as approaches to handling the dilemma?
4. Ask your staff what they think about the school district as a place to work. As a place open to new ideas. As a place which encourages growth among staff and rewards professional achievement.
5. Ask the community to identify priorities for the 1980s. Is it time to hold the line on new programs, or will new programs that demonstrate success be accepted no matter the cost?
6. Do high school students feel they are receiving adequate career counseling? Are the courses adequate to prepare them for selected careers? What about college freshmen—alumni of your schools? What do they think about the help they received?
7. Do citizens want to be more involved in their schools perhaps through an extensive volunteer program?
8. Does anyone really understand how the district operates? A survey can tell you, and alert you to a problem that could cause trouble unless a public information/education campaign is undertaken.

9. Will your bond issue pass? Are citizens getting the information they need to make informed decisions?
10. Do nonparents really care what goes on in the schools? What do they know? What do they want to know?

The biggest single mistake you can make in planning your survey program is to attempt to accomplish **too many things with one survey.** The survey is an effective tool—one of many—for soliciting community opinion about school issues. But it can create confusion and give conflicting information if not carefully focused. **Do a shorter, targeted survey** rather than an omnibus effort designed to meet the objectives of several different groups.

## What To Do First

The best way to start is to simply make a list of what you want to know. Think in categories—groups of logically related concerns or questions that seem to fit together. This will help you later when you select what is most important to accomplish with a single survey.

Organize your ideas and possible questions. For example, do you want your survey to answer questions about an upcoming election? What are the possible things you might like to know?

1. Is the community aware of the need for a different level of support?
2. Is the perception of a different level of support correct? (Do citizens feel the schools need more money . . . or less?)
3. If a vote were held today, would the funds be approved? If so, why? If not, why?

After such a preliminary list has been developed, circulate it to key people involved with the project, including administrators who may be ultimately charged with using the survey results to effect change in the school district and those who may be affected by the changes.

Consider hosting a brainstorming session with a carefully selected cross-section of your "publics" and toss ideas up for discussion. Develop a consensus about what it is you are trying to find out.

Finally, after your list seems fairly complete, take a long look at it again. Chances are, it will contain a variety of questions that deal with an even wider variety of topics. It must be focused to be useful—you may need to try again.

## A FINAL CHECKLIST

**If you're satisfied with the answers to the following questions, you are almost ready to begin:**

**1. Why do we want to know this?**

**2. How can we use this information to improve our school system?**

**3. Is this information already available from an existing source? Information is available at: libraries, chambers of commerce, city and county offices, universities and trade and professional associations. Don't waste time with a survey if you can get the information another way.**

**4. Am I willing to take a hard look at my survey results, and share them, even if I don't like what I find out?**

**5. Am I ready to recommend changes or further study based on what I find out in this survey? What can I do with this information?**

## What Does It Take?

After you've made the decision that a survey can help you, and you've identified what it is you would like to know, it's time to consider the resources you'll need.

Knowing what you want to ask isn't enough. You've got to know **who** to ask.

Knowing who to ask isn't enough either. You need to know how many "who's" to ask to be assured that your survey is a **valid** look at what the public is thinking at that particular time.

Finally, after figuring out the what, the who, and the how many, you've got to be able to interpret the survey results—to turn the data into information that can be useful.

**All this takes resources—human and financial.**

The human resources you'll need may include volunteers to do the actual survey, regardless of the type of survey you decide to use (more on that later). You may need help compiling the data, and probably in interpreting the results.

Although surveys completed by professional pollsters can cost thousands of dollars, an effective feedback program can be organized for hundreds. It will be money well spent—an investment really, in keeping in touch with the community that will divide up into pennies per person.

Exactly how big a budget you need is difficult to say. In districts with access to computers and staff members to assist in using them, costs can be kept extremely low. In others, where some outside help may be needed to supervise the survey or assist with analyzing results, costs will be higher.

**A telephone survey** (the easiest and most popular type for school people to try) can be completed for under $100 using only district resources, and generally for under $4,000 with outside help. Colleges and universities have a keen interest in research projects and are often willing to involve staff members in surveys for small honorariums.

## The Timeline—Working Backwards to Stay Ahead

Start with the date that the survey report is due—when will the information be the most valuable? Work backwards to develop a timeline. What will happen during this time period that may affect the report?

Let's assume you have a bond issue that will be voted on in **June.** The board must publicly select a date for the election in **March,** so the word will be spread through the community by the media at that time. Tax bills will go to the community in **April.**

Your **survey timeline** might look like this, assuming an election date of June 22.

| | |
|---|---|
| Final Survey Report Due | June 1 |
| Analysis of Findings | May 22 |
| Administer the Survey | May 7-14 |
| Final Training for Volunteers Who Will Conduct the Survey | May 1 |
| Pretesting of Survey Questionnaire | April 15-22 |
| Survey Questionnaire Development including brainstorming sessions and participation by variety of those involved in the election | March 22-April 14 |
| Evaluation of Need for Survey | March 1-March 14 |

This timeline reflects two concerns:

- the survey should be conducted **after** the tax bills are delivered in the community to make sure that this major variable in attitude development is taken into consideration (citizens might support a tax increase until they are reminded of their tax burden when the bill arrives); and,
- the purpose of this survey is to adapt the final campaign tactics to provide information most requested by citizens. By waiting until a relatively short period of time before the election, the survey promises to deliver a better perspective of true community opinion. There is still sufficient time to adapt campaign tactics.

## A Survey Program

The problems associated with occasional surveys, or one-shot efforts, are the best reasons for consideration of a comprehensive, continuous survey program that measures public attitudes about key issues on a regular basis, repeating key surveys over a period of time that allows for comparisons to be made.

Getting in touch with the community is the best investment in public relations any school district can make. Keeping in touch pays added dividends.

# Chapter 3
# Getting Set to Start

The stage is set. You've secured a commitment for the resources needed to do an effective job and a promise to put the findings of the survey—good or bad—to work to improve the school system. Before you begin, organize your thinking so that you can follow these steps:

1. Decide what you want to know;
2. Ask yourself why you want to know this;
3. Make sure the information isn't already available from another source;
4. Decide who you are going to survey;
5. Select a survey method;
6. Develop a timeline you can meet for the survey project; and,
7. Establish confidence limits for the survey.

## Deciding Who To Interview

What you want to know has the most direct bearing on who you'll interview. It usually makes no sense, for example, to interview high school seniors for opinions on the school tax burden. Many will have opinions, but few actually pay taxes.

In the past, the easiest decision was to interview parents about schools. Generally, parents were easy interview targets because there are countless lists of parents available from school records.

A national phenomenon makes this natural choice a little less easy today. The number of parents has decreased to the point that asking only parents about schools—especially on financial issues—provides a skewed picture of reality. More non-parents (those without children in public schools) than parents support the schools through tax dollars because of declining enrollments. **Non-parents cannot be ignored—they are two-thirds of America's population.**

There are times, however, when interviewing parents only makes perfect sense. Curriculum changes affecting students will most likely interest only parents, and support for such changes will

be needed first from the parent group (assuming the changes are already supported by the school staff).

On the other hand, closing school buildings does not involve only parents, even though the students in such buildings will be primarily affected. Many people buy homes in neighborhoods with schools because they believe that an improved quality of life exists there. The thought that a school might close can lead to rumors that the building will be shuttered and subject to vandalism. Property values **could decline**—so the rumors will go—and future sales of homes in the area **could be affected.** On that basis, everyone in the community becomes intensely interested in school closings, and everyone will have an opinion.

## Narrowing Your Choices

The first step, obviously, is the hardest. Take a look at what you want to know and decide who might have the information you need. Non-parents and parents alike? Just staff members? Just students? Narrow the field and arrive at a consensus of opinion. Then begin thinking about where to draw names of representative people to sample.

## Drawing A Sample

The representative group for your survey is known as a **sample.** A sample consists of a smaller group of individuals chosen in a specific manner to reflect the attitudes of a larger group.

**Confidence levels can be established with a survey.** Simply put, confidence levels indicate how accurately your survey reflects the attitudes of the people sampled.

Generally, surveys with a confidence level of 95 percent are considered excellent. This means that in 100 survey projects conducted under exactly the same circumstances, 95 surveys would show the same results. Contrary to what you might think, a 95 percent confidence level in a survey of **20,000 people** can be obtained with a sample size of only **377 people.** That's one reason surveys have proven so valuable.

The list of people you will draw your sample from is often called a **universe** or **population.** It is simply a collection of the people you would like to interview.

Most school districts like to use registered voter lists or community census lists as the universe for their studies. The logic is simple.

Registered voters include nearly all adults in most communities. The advent of easy voter registration systems in many states and voter registration drives that have come with the political activism of the past decade mean the list is often a good choice for study.

From this registered voter list come the names of those most likely to vote in school elections. Many surveys are conducted to find out opinions about tax matters and other financial problems that may affect taxes. That makes use of the list even more sensible.

A census list, on the other hand, has the advantage of being essentially a house-to-house canvas of all citizens in the community. **When updated annually,** it is a complete list of every home in the community, parent and non-parent alike. Problems with the census list come with incomplete data (phone numbers are often not available) and with age of the list (not every district completes a census each year and mobility puts the list quickly out of date).

Other samples could be drawn from telephone books, but the books often underrepresent some segments of the community, including minorities and those with privately listed numbers (on the rise everywhere). It is possible to randomly generate telephone numbers, which will by chance include private numbers, but school districts generally are not sophisticated enough to handle the complexities of doing so, and those interviewed sometimes have hostile reactions to having their privacy disrupted.

## WHAT'S THE BEST— AND EASIEST—THING TO DO?

With all this in mind, the easiest list to use is the registered voter list. It is updated frequently and is easily available.

## Using The Sample Table

No matter what type of survey you decide to use (telephone, mail, or personal interview) you must decide how big your sample needs to be to have confidence levels that provide you with enough assurance of having good information to work with.

A sample table (see Appendix A) will help you find the answer to this mystery. The table is simply a mathematically derived compilation of statistics—a chart that is simple to use.

The chart gives a choice between three levels of confidence. Each level is an excellent achievement. There are few places where you can be 90 percent sure of your facts. A confidence level of 95 or 90 is more than enough on which to base decisions.

## How Big Is Your Universe?

Determine the size of your universe. For example, if there are 20,000 names on the registered voter list, your universe is 20,000. To determine how big your sample needs to be, simply locate the intersection of your universe and the confidence level on the sample table.

If, for example, you have decided to seek a confidence level of 95 percent, follow down that column until you come to a universe size of 20,000. It indicates that a sample of 377 will provide the needed confidence level.

## But, There's A Bit More To It!

Although the example just given indicates that a sample of 377 will provide a confidence rating of 95 percent from a universe of 20,000, it's important to remember that this requires the completion of at **least 377 interviews.** How you select those 377 names is important.

Just as important as how you select those names is how diligent you are in completing interviews with as many of the 377 as you can. No matter which list you use to develop names for your universe, it is rare that you will find it easy to reach all 377 names without some trouble.

The lists have some common (but not insurmountable) problems: they are sometimes inaccurate, outdated, incomplete. Completing the interviews with those selected is sometimes impossible.

Simply put, this means you have to work as hard as possible to contact **377.** Calling back several times during the original survey time period may be needed. Perhaps you can make an appointment to call when the individual is certain to be home. Some surveyors have used—as a final resort—a mail survey for individuals they cannot reach by telephone.

The confidence levels for your survey go down if you are unable to complete interviews with the members of your sample. Work hard to contact them all.

## Techniques for Selecting the Sample

One of the key reasons that a smaller sample of a larger universe can be used to accurately reflect the opinions of the larger group is that it is **randomly selected.** Everyone in the universe has a chance of being selected for the sample. (See Appendix B.)

**A systematic random sample** needs to be selected. It is known as systematic simply because it uses a "system" to assure fairness and equal opportunity.

### SIX STEPS TO SELECT YOUR SAMPLE

1. Establish the confidence level.
2. Determine the sample size.
3. Select a systematic random sample. To do this determine the skip interval for your sample. The skip interval is determined by dividing the universe—20,000 in the example we have been using—by the sample size (377). This gives a skip interval of 53.
4. Select a "random number." There are random number tables available, but it is just as safe to pick a number by drawing slips of paper from a fishbowl. The random number must be between one and the skip interval (in our example, 53).
5. If the random number selected was 10 count down the registered voter list for whatever list you are using to 10.
6. Starting with the tenth name, skip 53 names to obtain the second name for your sample, then skip another 53 names for the third, continuing this system until you have selected the 377 names for your sample.

# Chapter 4
# Deciding What Kind Of Survey To Use

There are three basic types of surveys: **personal interviews, mail,** and **telephone.** The telephone has become an increasingly useful instrument for survey work, especially for school districts. Mail surveys provide the least return for the amount of work needed to conduct an accurate effort, and personal interviews frequently require more resources than school districts can commit. A look at the pluses and minuses of each system follows.

## Personal Interviews

The type of survey you are probably most familiar with is the personal interview. The polls we watch during an election year are primarily done using this technique. Basically, a trained researcher visits with a selected individual in a question and answer format. Surveys can take as little as five minutes, or as long as several hours.

**Advantages:** The principal advantage of a personal interview approach is that complex questions requiring some preliminary explanation can be used. Interviewers can probe for answers, and make judgments about responses. Also, observation ("what was the condition of the furniture?") is not possible with either the mail or telephone surveys.

Detailed information can be gathered, and the interviewer can explain the issues using visual aids or extended explanations. Usually, the personal contact involved stimulates everyone to participate.

**Disadvantages:** The problems? Quite a few, from the perspective of school officials.

The principal problem is cost. It takes money to train interviewers or to hire experienced interviewers from a professional firm. The use of untrained volunteers allows bias to creep into survey results. Further, untrained volunteers do not have the skills

of observation or probing approaches to interviewing that make the technique useful.

With so many interviewers needed to complete surveys, supervision is a problem. Each interviewer works independently, and different approaches to the questions can create different types of responses.

Finally, as mentioned above, unless a large number of interviewers is used, the time it takes to conduct such a survey is usually prohibitive.

## Mail Surveys

**Advantages:** Many of the problems with the personal interview approach are avoided by using mail surveys. Wide distribution of questionnaires is possible at low cost. There is no interviewer bias, since no interviewers are involved. You can reach remote places. People can take their time, suggesting that more may be included to answer at their leisure.

**Disadvantages:** The amount of effort required to successfully conduct such a survey makes it useful only as a supplement to other data-gathering studies. The information gained often does not represent the universe being studied, but only those that return the surveys (unless the response is unusually high).

A typical mail survey project might involve these steps to insure an adequate return:

1. A survey would be mailed to the sample with a letter explaining the purpose of the survey, encouraging a response, and providing a self-addressed, stamped return envelope;
2. After a few days, a post-card reminder would be sent to those who had not yet returned the survey;
3. After a few more days, a personal telephone call would be made to those who had not yet returned the survey, urging them to do so;
4. Sometimes, a new copy of the survey would be sent to those who had not yet returned the survey after steps two and three, suggesting that if they had misplaced the original package, they could complete this survey.

As you can see, this requires much time and money to get results.

There are other problems too. Accurate, updated mailing lists are hard to get. Returns may not be representative of the entire group being surveyed. Those who return the survey may have

taken the time to become extremely familiar with the issues, providing a measure of their attitude after it had been influenced—and not before.

Questionnaire length must be limited to encourage responses since it is difficult to expect citizens to spend more than just a few minutes with each survey. With a mail questionnaire, there is no way to make sure that the person understands the question, leaving open the possibility that the question might be misinterpreted and answered differently from what might be expected.

The accuracy of your survey depends, in part, on its completion by individuals who make up the sample you have selected. When a mail questionnaire arrives at home for Bill Mason, there is no way to prevent Bill's visiting cousin from completing the survey "because I'm interested in stuff like this." Also, it is difficult to use this type of survey with complex subjects which require some preliminary explanation.

In all, mail surveys are not very useful for school officials. They are time consuming and expensive. Unfortunately, mailing out several hundred survey questionnaires has often seemed to be the "politically correct" thing to do.

## Telephone Surveys

**Advantages:** Despite some problems, telephone surveys have proven to be quick, efficient and accurate for school public relations work. Once a system is established, telephone surveys can be completed literally overnight during times of crisis.

Telephone surveys are conducted by trained interviewers and work best for well-defined, basic concepts and specific questions. The information sought is usually non-confidential (therefore not threatening) and is limited in amount. Most telephone surveys are completed in **seven to 15 minutes.**

The telephone has wide geographic reach, and people who are not at home can be easily reached by a follow-up telephone call. There is little bias because primarily closed-end questions (see following section) are used.

**Disadvantages:** There are some problems and potential for bias. First, such surveys are limited to telephone subscriber locations and listed numbers. (As previously mentioned, there is a way to use a random number technique to select telephone numbers, but it's difficult for a novice. Some districts overcome this prob-

lem by supplementing the telephone calls with mailed questionnaires to those with unlisted numbers.)

It is almost impossible to gain motivational information without observation, as is possible with personal interviews. Also, only limited classification data can be collected.

Despite these limitations, telephone surveys have proven the most flexible and useful for school officials. Volunteers don't need too much training, and if all calls are made from a central location (the recommended way) supervisors can listen in on the interviewer end of the conversation and monitor for quality and nonbiased approaches to gaining information. A sample telephone survey is included in Appendix C.

# Chapter 5
# Asking the Right Questions

There are a variety of ways to ask questions. The basic survey techniques involve the following types of questions.

## Dichotomous

Do you have any children in school?

This type of question is a good opener, providing a specific answer to a question. It is easy for the person being interviewed, and easy for the interviewer. This type of question is intended to categorize, or divide into groups.

## Closed Response

What newspaper do you usually read for school information?

The main problem with this type of question is that it assumes that all relevant alternative answers to the question are known, and the list of answers can sometimes become cumbersome. It is specific, and allows no flexibility.

Closed response questions are easy on the interviewer, how-

ever, and often easy on the person being interviewed. It provides specific answers, can be quickly edited and tabulated, and is easy to pretest.

## Multiple Choice

Which of the following kinds of school information do you want most?

- ☐ curriculum
- ☐ finance
- ☐ child's progress
- ☐ other

If this question is pretested and constructed properly, all possible answers can be provided, and the respondent is less likely to make an arbitrary choice. It is easily tabulated and analyzed, and is not demanding on either interviewer or respondent.

There are key problems which must be taken into account, however. It does presuppose all relevant answers. It is difficult to avoid overlapping answers, especially if the alternatives are not presented clearly, and the alternatives may have different meanings for different respondents. Finally, the order of the choices may bias the answers. (Random ordering of the choices among different interviewers will help avoid this bias.)

## Rating Scales

How would you rate the quality of our schools?

- ☐ very good
- ☐ good
- ☐ average
- ☐ below average
- ☐ don't know

The advantage of rating scales is the ability of measuring intensity of feeling toward an issue. They are fairly precise and easy to pretest. The type of scale you use is not important, providing it allows for a precise selection of responses.

The problem is one of definition. What is average to one person is very good to another. The intervals on the rating scale may not be distinct enough to provide choices in the respondent's mind, or may not reflect the respondent's knowledge level.

## Preference Questions

Which of these services is most important?

Answers to questions like these sometimes do not reflect the real world because they are taken out of context. **Example:** Some services may be more valuable than others, but some may be required by law. A long series of such questions can wear out an interview subject.

## Ranking

How would you rank these school services?

transportation ( )
school lunch ( )
breakfast program ( )

Respondents have difficulty ranking more than four or five items, and there is little indication of the degree of preference in such rating scales. Like preference questions, these are easily taken out of context and may not reflect the real world.

They do yield information quickly, however, and provide at least a glimpse of priorities.

## Subject Introduction

Where do you usually get your information about schools?

Questions of this type leave little room for misunderstanding – but they are very hard to code or combine into groups of answers. They are rarely used at the beginning of surveys. They introduce topics for discussion.

## Probing

Why do you like this particular information source?

Like the subject introduction, answers to probing questions are difficult to code and record into useful data. It is hard to accurately interpret the answers and record consistently. Probing does, however, elicit further information, and can often turn up data that might prove useful.

Each of these types of questions plays a role in constructing a good survey. In the sample survey provided in Appendix C, note the variety of types of question formats employed.

Pretest your questions to make sure they are easy to understand, and not full of fuzzy terms that might confuse people. You may find what's clear as a bell to you will never ring for others.

One key reason for having others review your questions has little basis in science but revolves around **how they sound.** Your interviewers must be clear when they talk on the telephone. Does the question read well? Make it as simple as possible. Write your questions conversationally, just the way you might talk with a friend. Read all questions aloud as a double check.

Pretesting both the individual questions and the entire survey questionnaire is extremely important. It can often make or break your survey—especially when you are doing your first project. After trying the survey in a real test situation, you may decide to alter the order of questions based on how cooperative respondents were and how much time it took to complete various combinations of the questions.

# Chapter 6
# Using Volunteers to Conduct the Survey

After your survey instrument has been pretested and carefully constructed, you'll need to select volunteers to conduct it. A small group—perhaps 20—can complete up to 400 telephone interviews easily in a day or two.

## Telephone Interviews

For volunteers who will be conducting telephone interviews training is fairly easy. You should:

- go over the questionnaire word for word and make sure that everyone understands all questions and what they mean;

- have the volunteers practice interviewing each other;
- provide answers for basic questions like "who is doing this survey?" what to do when no one is home, how to get the person on the sample list to the telephone, how to complete the survey without offering personal opinions; and,
- how to mark the survey answer sheets.

Make sure all your volunteers are comfortable about the project and have all their questions answered. During the pretesting period, you may find your volunteers facing unexpected resistance or questions. Have a final post-pretest session to discuss what worked well, what new questions may have arisen, and any last minute fears the group may have—or rumors they've picked up about the survey from their friends.

It's the basics which are often overlooked and which often cause problems. A mismarked answer sheet—repeated 20 times—will have an effect on total survey results. The time spent training volunteers is critical.

## Where Volunteers Come From

Volunteers for school survey projects seem to come from gregarious, curious, supportive people who are probably already involved—parents, the League of Women Voters, the PTA, school committees, community service clubs, church organizations, senior citizen groups, etc.

Many districts have solved this problem by identifying especially talented telephone interviewers and paying small stipends. These volunteers take on a new status as "super-volunteers" and become part of a regular talent bank that's available to conduct interviews. It's a system that works.

# Chapter 7
# Analyzing Results

The payoff, of course, comes with the compilation of data. But first it must be analyzed, and some general conclusions drawn.

Computers can help if you have access to them. If you don't, it's possible local universities or colleges can help. You may be able to find a local business that could provide both computer time and the expertise to process the data.

**But only you will be able to interpret the data. The key dangers are not to make assumptions based on weak facts, or to make assumptions based on insufficient data.**

For example, in one survey which included questions about the openness of communications in a school district, a districtwide sample of 377 provided a glimpse into what the community as a whole was thinking about relationships with the schools. When the responses were broken down into **individual schools,** however, **there were insufficient numbers of respondents to make any judgments about what individual school neighborhoods thought about the same question.**

What seemed like a good idea—asking how parents of school "X" felt about communication in the district—was not. Instead of 377 survey respondents, only 30 were from school "X." That small number was just not enough to tell a true story.

The temptation is always there to make such generalizations, especially when you try to use survey results to prove a point you may have already decided before the survey began. Keep an open mind, and take a close look at every bit of data before you make any statements about what the survey seems to be saying.

When compiling the data and analyzing it for presentation, consider who will be evaluating the report. Is this directed at the board of education? The superintendent? Curriculum specialist? Each has unique needs and points of view. Prepare your report with a **receiver orientation.** Put yourself in their shoes—what do you think they would like to know? What would you like them to know? It only makes good sense to package the survey report to emphasize key findings.

## The Trap

There ia a tendency to take the survey results and become an instant expert on everything the survey covered. Unless you have special training, expertise or insights, avoid making pronouncements based on survey results. Compile the data, make observations, organize responses in useful charts and tables, but avoid saying, "This shows that this is true and here's what's going to happen."

It is far better to bring in an expert again, perhaps a college or university survey specialist—to assist with analysis. Allow your board or your superintendent and his staff to review the preliminary survey results, ask questions, seek clarifications, ponder your insights, and collectively reach a consensus about what this all means.

**A survey is a team project—keep it that way.**

## Reporting What You've Learned

One of the biggest mistakes you can make is to conduct a survey and then keep it secret. The fact that you've taken the trouble to conduct the survey indicates that you're interested in maintaining two-way communication with the public. To complete the equation, you must tell what you've learned.

The smart thing is to publicize the survey from the beginning. Announce that you are conducting a survey and explain why. Tell when you will be doing it, and urge citizens to cooperate. Promise to tell what the results of the survey are, and to tell what—if anything—you will do with what you learn.

The results should be shared with both staff and community. Many districts have published special reports to the community outlining the findings and listing, point by point, what actions will be taken as a result of the findings. Often, when the findings are surprising or unexpected, districts have invited further comment or study through special committees.

**The point is, people like to be asked their opinion, and once asked, they like to feel that their opinion mattered.**

# Chapter 8
# Wrap Up

Change is the only constant in America today. That rapid change is most evident in the public school system. What is true today can be changed by tomorrow, thanks to the immediate impact of communication vehicles like television and radio, and the influence of other popular media, including magazines and newspapers.

Once, everyone had a direct connection with the school district. People knew what was going on in the schoolhouse each day because they had children there, or listened to the tales of the classroom from visiting neighbor children.

Today, the only reports many citizens get are second-hand, and often from the mass media. To say that a complete view of our educational system is being presented is impossible.

That's why it is important to use the feedback tools available to you—as well as surveys—to gain insight about ever-changing community opinions.

## Other Ways To Get Feedback

Feedback should be built right into your school program and should be an integral part of all school activities. Careful listening is probably your most valuable feedback method.

**Speakers bureau**—when members of your speakers bureau accept an invitation to speak be certain to ask them to include a question-and-answer session and encourage them to report what they hear.

**Listeners bureau**—have top staff members volunteer to attend parent and other community meetings just to answer questions and receive suggestions for the improvement of the system and the schools.

**Public hearings**—although these are frequently difficult and not particularly encouraged if you have a potentially volatile problem, the information gleaned can be extremely important in structuring your information program.

**Key communicators**—these community people who speak to a lot of other community people are not only your key resources for sending messages about the schools, but are even more important in providing you feedback on how the community views the schools. Seek their suggestions and concerns.

**Student rap sessions**—with the principal and/or superintendent, provide an open opportunity for student suggestions and questions about the school.

**Last fifteen minutes of the class period**—in many schools is devoted to an open airing of students' gripes, complaints, questions and suggestions. Teachers give principals written summaries of what's on the students' minds for them to share with other administrators.

**Suggestion boxes**—located strategically in the buildings into which students, staff and parents can place cards. Keep stacks of cards on display for use: "I have a question" — "I heard a rumor" — "I have an idea." Many districts also place such displays in public places—banks, stores, doctors' offices, etc.

**Monthly breakfasts**—for business, industry, parent and civic representatives to discuss the schools, hear a presentation by a school staff member, ask questions and give suggestions.

**Meetings with the clergy**—to elicit their concerns and suggestions and provide them with ongoing information about the schools.

**Exit interviews**—When a family or an employee leaves your school district, use this as an opportunity to find out what they thought about their experiences with you. Give them an opportunity to offer suggestions that could improve the working situation.

**Keep a log**—have secretaries and others answering phones in the schools keep a log of the questions they are asked. A daily and/or weekly review of this material provides you with valuable information and suggests areas in which you need to improve your communication.

**Read letters to the editors column**—read newspapers carefully and particularly the "letters to the editor" column to check questions and concerns about the schools.

**Build listening** into everything you do:

- The beauty parlor, barbershop and "bar" provide the 3B's of feedback. Listen to your fellow community members in these less than official meetings.
- Build in a five minute period of "what have you heard lately"—into the start of any school committee, staff or admin-

istration meeting. Make a list of these comments so that you can reflect on concerns and/or suggestions expressed.

- Spend a few minutes weekly with members of the support staff on a one-on-one situation asking their opinion about the schools or a specific program and providing them with an opportunity to tell you of any concerns they are having.
- Listen to the radio talk shows or "interview or opinion" type programs on local stations to hear comments about the schools.
- Listen when you attend church and community meetings or events, and build in a question about "what do you think of our schools?" Then turn your mind on to "record" so that you can recall these thoughts and put them on paper.

# Chapter 9
# Summary

There is no reason to wait. The resources you need to begin are minimal. A complete list of additional resources is provided in the appendix of this book, and you can get more help from survey specialists in your community. (Remember, check the local colleges or universities for help.)

Organize your thinking along these lines:

- Decide what you want to know.
- Ask yourself why you want to know this.
- Ask if you can get this information without doing a survey.
- Decide who you are going to survey.
- Determine the type of survey method you'll use.
- Establish confidence limits for the survey.
- Develop a timeline for the survey project.

After getting a firm commitment that the survey results will get the attention they deserve, organize your project according to this checklist:

1. Make a list of necessary resources (people and materials).
2. Secure financial support for the survey.
3. Draw a sample (choose the people to be interviewed).
4. Outline the content areas of the survey and frame initial questions.
5. Refine the initial questions and design a workable format.
6. Develop a first-draft questionnaire.
7. Pre-test the questionnaire.
8. Use pre-test findings to develop a final questionnaire.
9. Teach interviewers how to gather information.
10. Establish controls to make sure the interviewing gets done.
11. Conduct the interviews.
12. Prepare the questionnaires for tabulation.
13. Tabulate the data.
14. Analyze the results.
15. Report the new knowledge.

While public confidence in most public institutions has been dropping for a variety of reasons, there is a general feeling that the problem with today's schools is directly a result of the lack of involvement of the public in day-to-day issues affecting the schools. Nobody asks, so nobody cares.

Districts that have discovered surveys as a useful feedback tool are discovering that they can change public attitudes toward schools. Best of all, the public likes it.

You can't afford not to know what the public is thinking today. Get started . . . and get in touch.

# APPENDIX A

## SAMPLE SIZE TABLE

| Universe | 95 | 90 | Universe | 95 | 90 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 10 | 10 | 340 | 181 | 151 |
| 15 | 14 | 14 | 360 | 186 | 155 |
| 20 | 19 | 19 | 380 | 191 | 158 |
| 25 | 24 | 23 | 400 | 196 | 162 |
| 30 | 28 | 27 | 420 | 201 | 165 |
| 35 | 32 | 31 | 440 | 205 | 168 |
| 40 | 36 | 35 | 460 | 210 | 171 |
| 45 | 40 | 39 | 480 | 214 | 173 |
| 50 | 44 | 43 | 500 | 217 | 176 |
| 55 | 48 | 46 | 559 | 226 | 182 |
| 60 | 52 | 49 | 600 | 234 | 187 |
| 65 | 56 | 53 | 650 | 242 | 191 |
| 70 | 59 | 56 | 700 | 248 | 195 |
| 75 | 63 | 59 | 750 | 254 | 199 |
| 80 | 66 | 62 | 800 | 260 | 202 |
| 85 | 70 | 65 | 900 | 269 | 208 |
| 90 | 73 | 68 | 1000 | 278 | 213 |
| 95 | 86 | 71 | 1100 | 285 | 217 |
| 100 | 80 | 73 | 1200 | 291 | 221 |
| 110 | 86 | 78 | 1300 | 297 | 224 |
| 120 | 92 | 83 | 1400 | 302 | 227 |
| 130 | 97 | 88 | 1500 | 303 | 229 |
| 140 | 103 | 92 | 1600 | 310 | 238 |
| 150 | 108 | 97 | 2000 | 322 | 238 |
| 160 | 113 | 101 | 3000 | 341 | 248 |
| 170 | 118 | 105 | 4000 | 351 | 254 |
| 180 | 123 | 108 | 5000 | 357 | 257 |
| 190 | 127 | 112 | 10000 | 370 | 263 |
| 200 | 132 | 115 | 20000 | 377 | 267 |
| 210 | 130 | 118 | 30000 | 379 | 268 |
| 220 | 140 | 122 | 50000 | 381 | 269 |
| 230 | 144 | 125 | 100000 | 384 | 271 |
| 240 | 148 | 127 | | | |
| 250 | 152 | 130 | | | |
| 260 | 155 | 133 | | | |
| 270 | 159 | 135 | | | |
| 280 | 162 | 138 | | | |
| 290 | 165 | 140 | | | |
| 300 | 169 | 143 | | | |
| 320 | 175 | 147 | | | |

# APPENDIX B

HOW TO DRAW A SAMPLE

Assume for this example that we wish to attain a confidence level of 95 percent. Our community has a universe of 20,000 registered voters.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Establish confidence level | 1. 95 percent |
| 2. Determine sample size necessary | 2. Using a table to determine sample size, we find it necessary to interview 377 individuals to attain confidence objectives. |
| 3. Divide the universe by the sample size to obtain skip interval | 3. 20,000 divided by 377=53. The skip interval is 53. |
| 4. Select a random number larger than one but smaller than the skip interval | 4. Use a table of random numbers. Let's assume for this example that the random number is 10. |
| 5. Count to the random number | 5. Count to the 10th name in the registered voter list. The 10th individual will be the first person in the sample. |
| 6. Use the skip interval to select individuals until the sample size is obtained | 6. Count 53 names down the list from name number 10. That individual is the second person in the sample. Then count 53 more names to reach the third person in the sample... and so on until you have 377 names. You now have a sample which will provide 95 confidence for our universe of 20,000 registered voters. |

## SAMPLE SURVEY

Hello, (Mrs. Jones) I'm (interviewer's name) a volunteer calling for the _____ Public Schools.

We're conducting a telephone survey to find out what people think about their schools.

We'll be calling almost 400 randomly selected school district residents during the survey, and would like just a few minutes of your time for some important questions.

Incidentally, your answers will remain confidential--all responses will be averaged to obtain a general picture of community opinion.

1. First, how many children do you have attending the _____ Public Schools?

   (1) None ( SKIP to Question 3)
   (2) 1
   (3) 2
   (4) 3-4
   (5) 5-6
   (6) 7-8
   (7) 9 or more

2. What grades are they in?

   (1) Elementary
   (2) Junior High (7-9)
   (3) Senior High (10-12)

3. Do you feel you are able to keep well informed, somewhat well informed, or not too well informed about what is going on in the _____ Public Schools?

   (1) well informed
   (2) somewhat informed
   (3) not too well informed
   (4) can't say/no response

## SAMPLE SURVEY (Continued)

4. Where do you get most of your information about the _____ Public Schools? (DO NOT READ LIST)

   (1) students
   (2) other parents/adults
   (3) school employees
   (4) newspaper
   (5) radio/TV
   (6) notes, memos, other school publications
   (7) PTA/parent groups
   (8) other_____
   (9) can't say/no response

5. Would you like to know more about the _____ Public Schools?

   (1) yes
   (2) no (SKIP to Question 7)

6. What kinds of information would be of particular interest to you? (DO NOT READ LIST)

   (1) the curriculum
   (2) child's progress
   (3) teachers/teaching methods
   (4) school rules/policies
   (5) financial information
   (6) extra curricular activities
   (7) special services available
   (8) everything
   (9) other_____
   (0) can't say/no response

Students are often given the grades A, B, C, D, E to show how well they're doing in school. Suppose your school district were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the _____ Public Schools - A, B, C, D, or E.

   (1) A
   (2) B
   (3) C
   (4) D
   (5) E
   (6) can't say/no response

8. The Board of Education would like to improve your schools. Suppose for a moment that you were on the Board of Education--what do you think could be done to improve our schools next year?

_____

_____



APPENDIX C

The main business of the National School Public Relations Association (NSPRA), formed in 1935, is to help bring about better citizen understanding of the objectives, accomplishments, and needs of schools. NSPRA's mission is to build support for education through responsible public relations and communication.

If the duties of your position call for communicating with the public or others in the field of education, NSPRA membership is a must for you. NSPRA member services include: *PARAGRAPHS* (member newsletter), Public Relations Resource Center, Research Assistance, PR Hotline Counseling Service, Personnel Clearinghouse, National Representation, reduced rates for members at NSPRA's annual National Seminar and a voluntary accreditation program. There are four categories of NSPRA membership: institutional, professional, associate, and student.

Other NSPRA Products, Services and Activities include: *EDUCATION USA, IT STARTS IN THE CLASSROOM* and *FEDERAL FUNDING ALERT* newsletters; workshops and consulting services; special publications and audiovisual materials.

To order additional titles of "*Basic School PR Guides,*" or to obtain information about NSPRA membership, products and services, contact: National School Public Relations Association, 1801 North Moore Street, Arlington, Virginia 22209, (703) 528-5840.